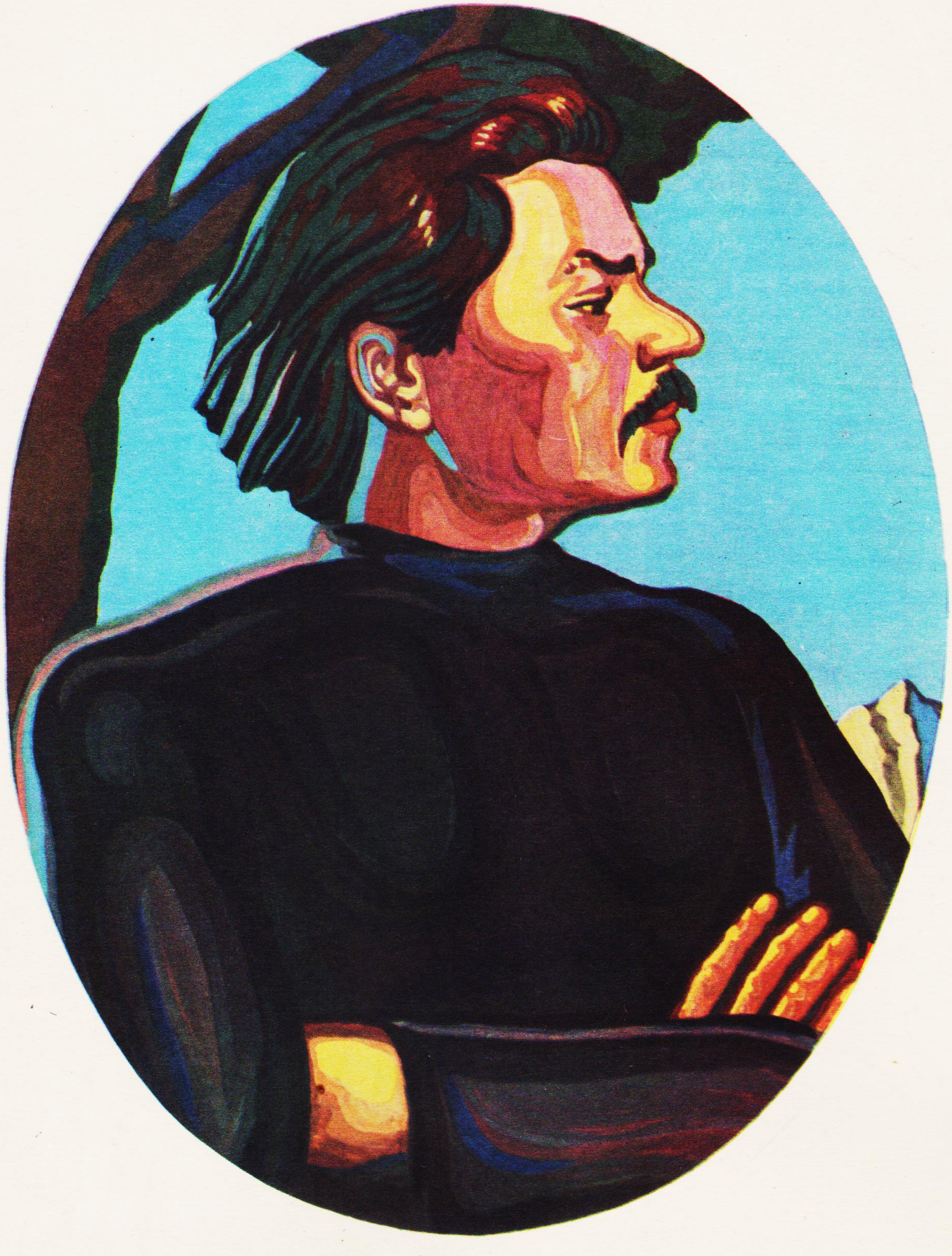
MAXIM GORKY

DANKO'S BURNING HEART



Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) has written some beautiful stories for young readers. The legend about Danko is one of the most romantic of these.

MAXIM GORKY

DANKO'S BURNING HEART

Translated from the Russian by *Margaret Wettlin*

Drawings by *V. K. Bisengaliev*

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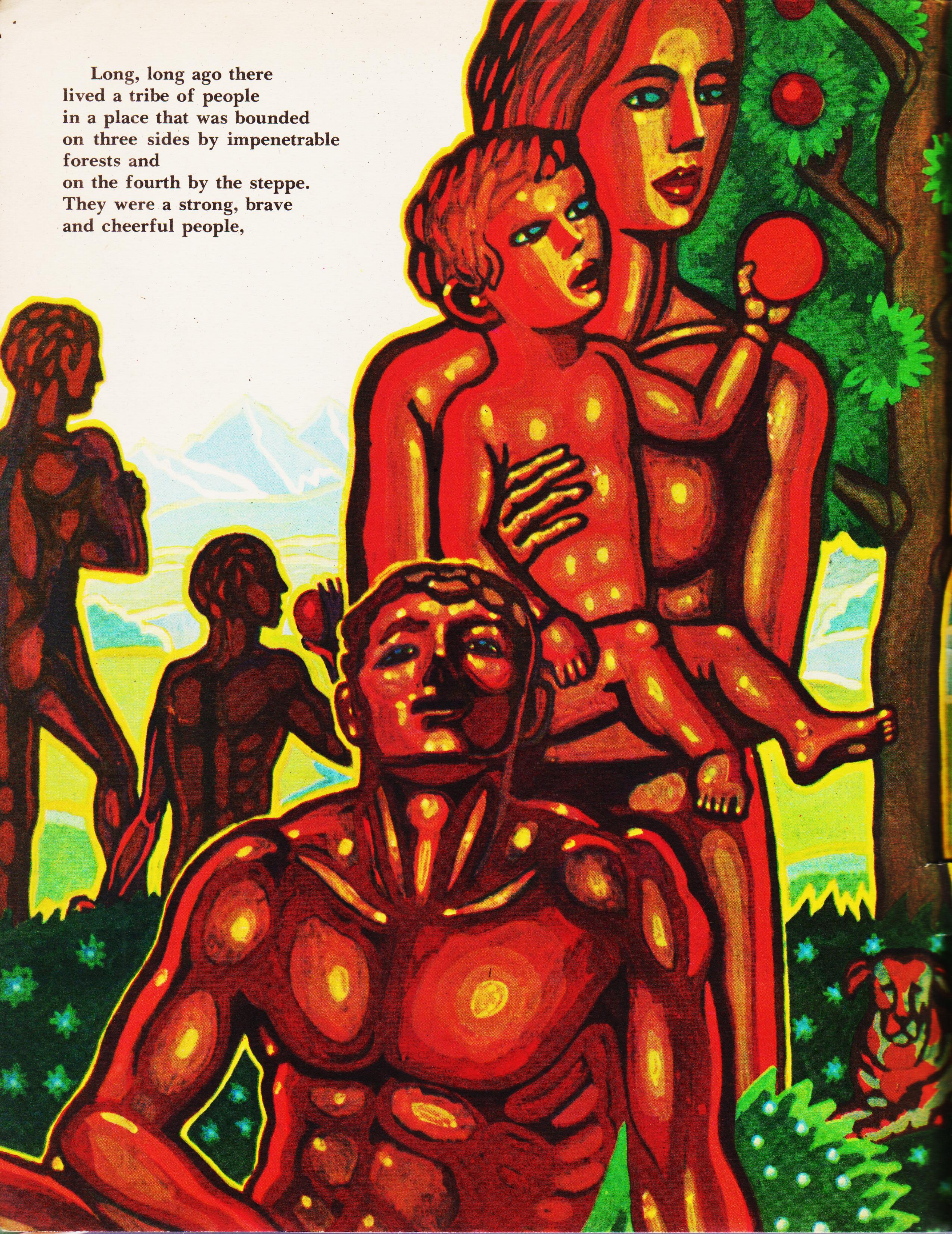
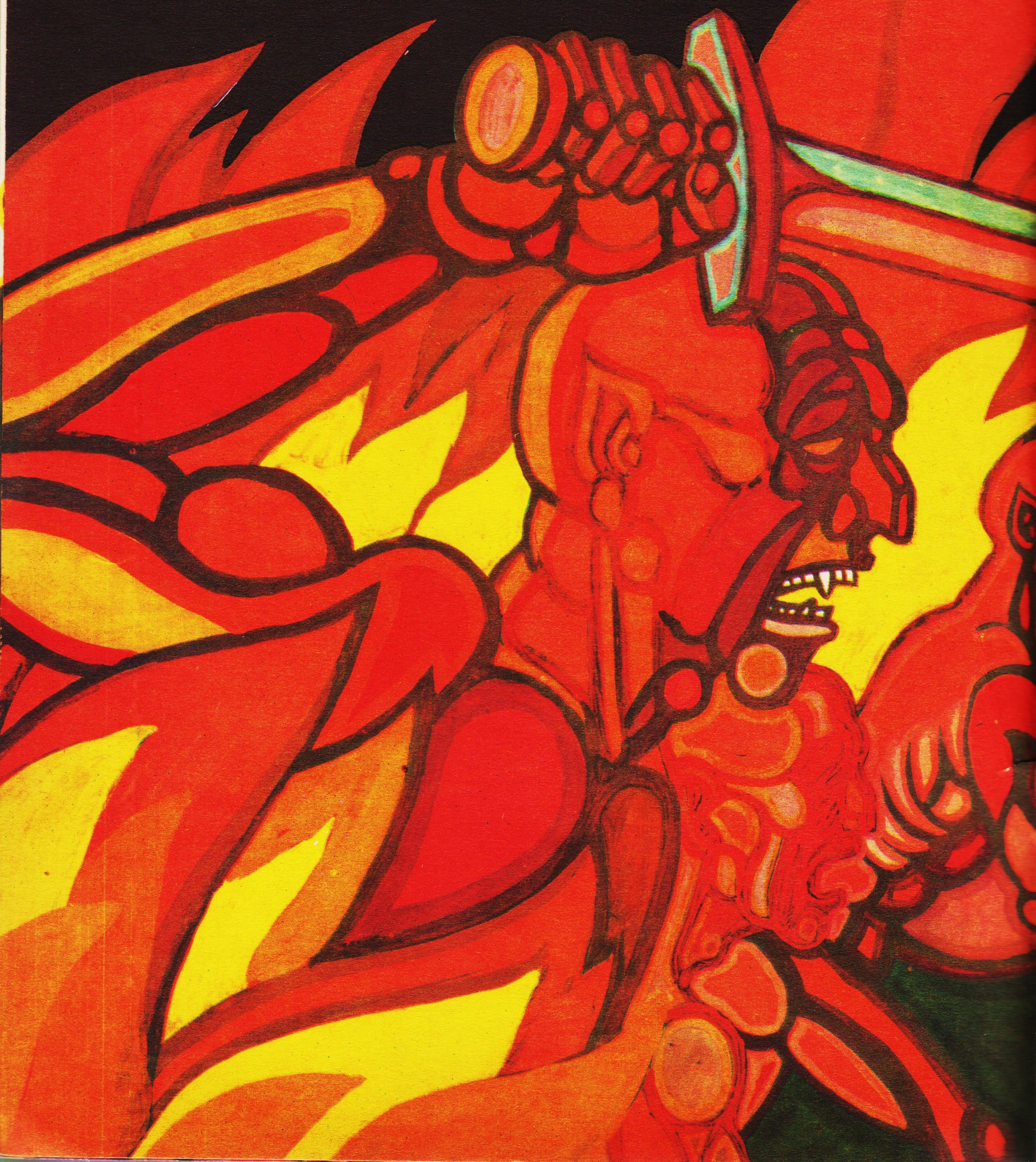
Long, long ago there
lived a tribe of people
in a place that was bounded
on three sides by impenetrable
forests and
on the fourth by the steppe.
They were a strong, brave
and cheerful people,

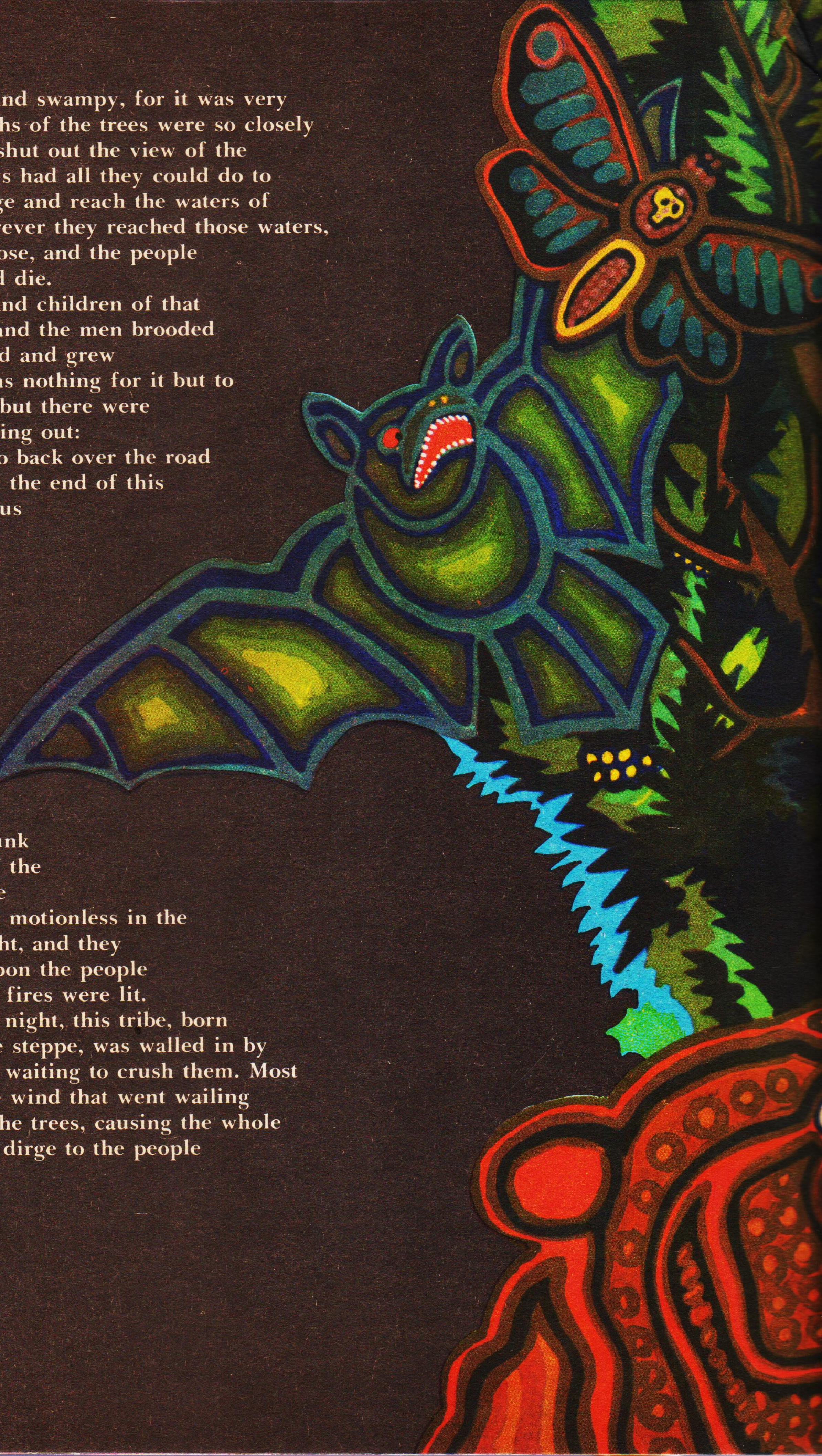


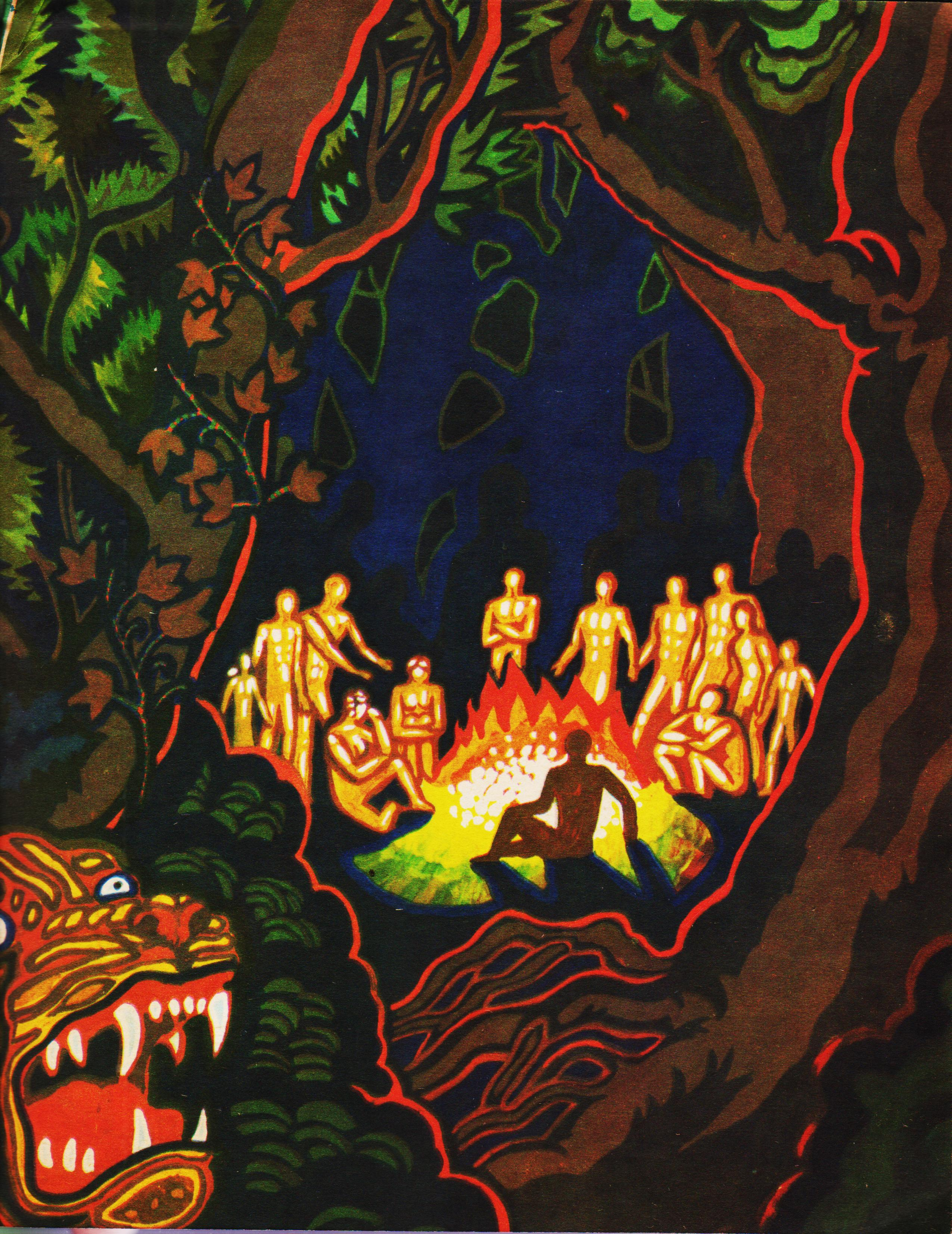
but evil times came upon them. Other tribes came warring against them and drove them into the depths of the forest.



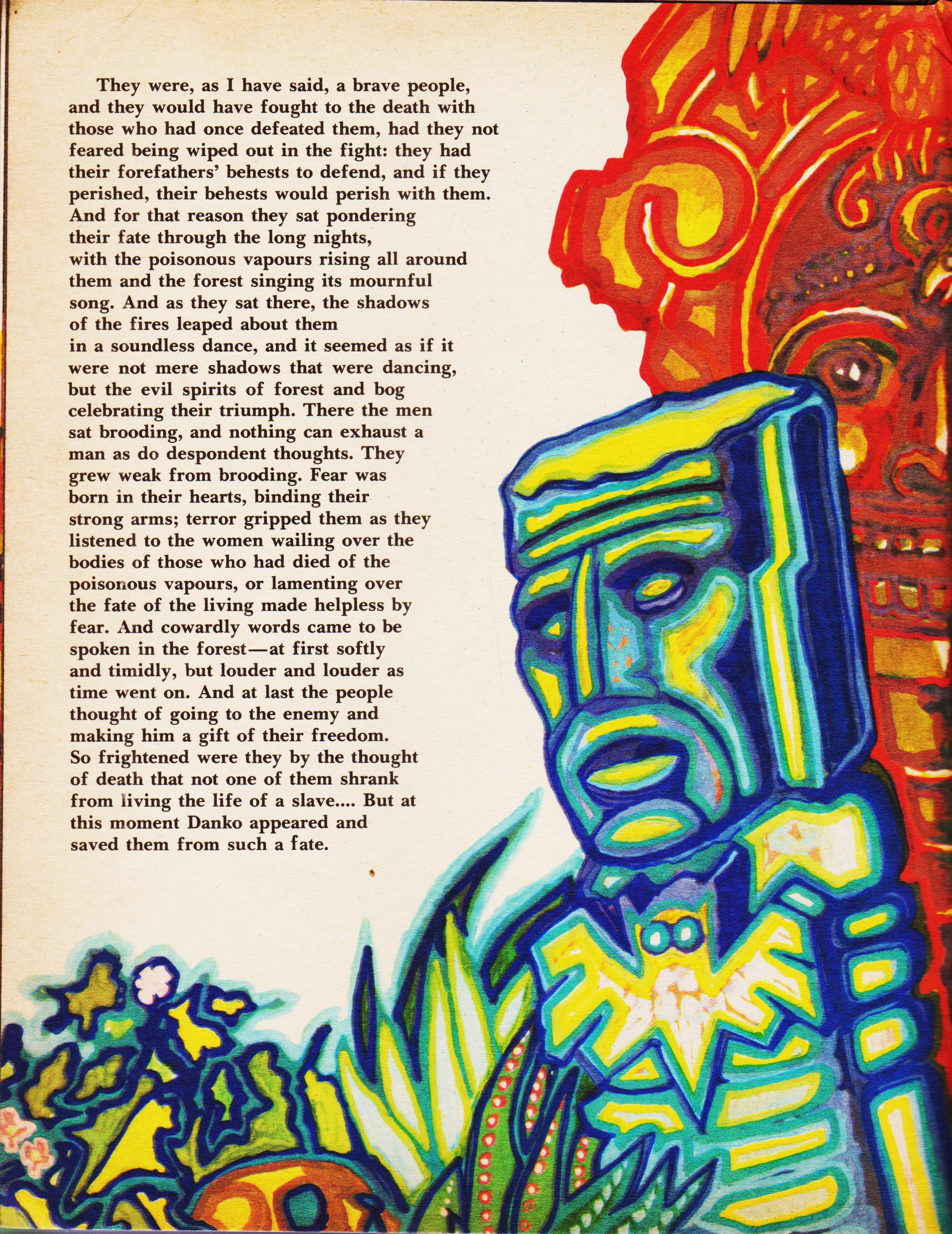
The forest was dark and swampy, for it was very ancient, and the boughs of the trees were so closely interwoven that they shut out the view of the sky, and the sun's rays had all they could do to pierce the thick foliage and reach the waters of the swamp. And wherever they reached those waters, poisonous vapours arose, and the people began to take sick and die.

Then the women and children of that tribe began to weep, and the men brooded on what had happened and grew despondent. There was nothing for it but to get out of the forest, but there were only two ways of getting out: one of them was to go back over the road they had come, but at the end of this road strong and vicious foes awaited them; the other was to push forward through the forest, but here they would come up against the giant trees whose mighty branches were closely entwined and whose gnarled roots were sunk deep into the mire of the bogs. These stone-like trees stood silent and motionless in the grey gloom of daylight, and they seemed to close in upon the people at nightfall when the fires were lit. And always, day and night, this tribe, born to the freedom of the steppe, was walled in by shadows that seemed waiting to crush them. Most fearful of all was the wind that went wailing through the tops of the trees, causing the whole forest to sing a grim dirge to the people imprisoned there.





They were, as I have said, a brave people, and they would have fought to the death with those who had once defeated them, had they not feared being wiped out in the fight: they had their forefathers' behests to defend, and if they perished, their behests would perish with them. And for that reason they sat pondering their fate through the long nights, with the poisonous vapours rising all around them and the forest singing its mournful song. And as they sat there, the shadows of the fires leaped about them in a soundless dance, and it seemed as if it were not mere shadows that were dancing, but the evil spirits of forest and bog celebrating their triumph. There the men sat brooding, and nothing can exhaust a man as do despondent thoughts. They grew weak from brooding. Fear was born in their hearts, binding their strong arms; terror gripped them as they listened to the women wailing over the bodies of those who had died of the poisonous vapours, or lamenting over the fate of the living made helpless by fear. And cowardly words came to be spoken in the forest—at first softly and timidly, but louder and louder as time went on. And at last the people thought of going to the enemy and making him a gift of their freedom. So frightened were they by the thought of death that not one of them shrank from living the life of a slave.... But at this moment Danko appeared and saved them from such a fate.



Danko was one of them, and he was young and handsome. Handsome people are always courageous. And he said to his comrades:

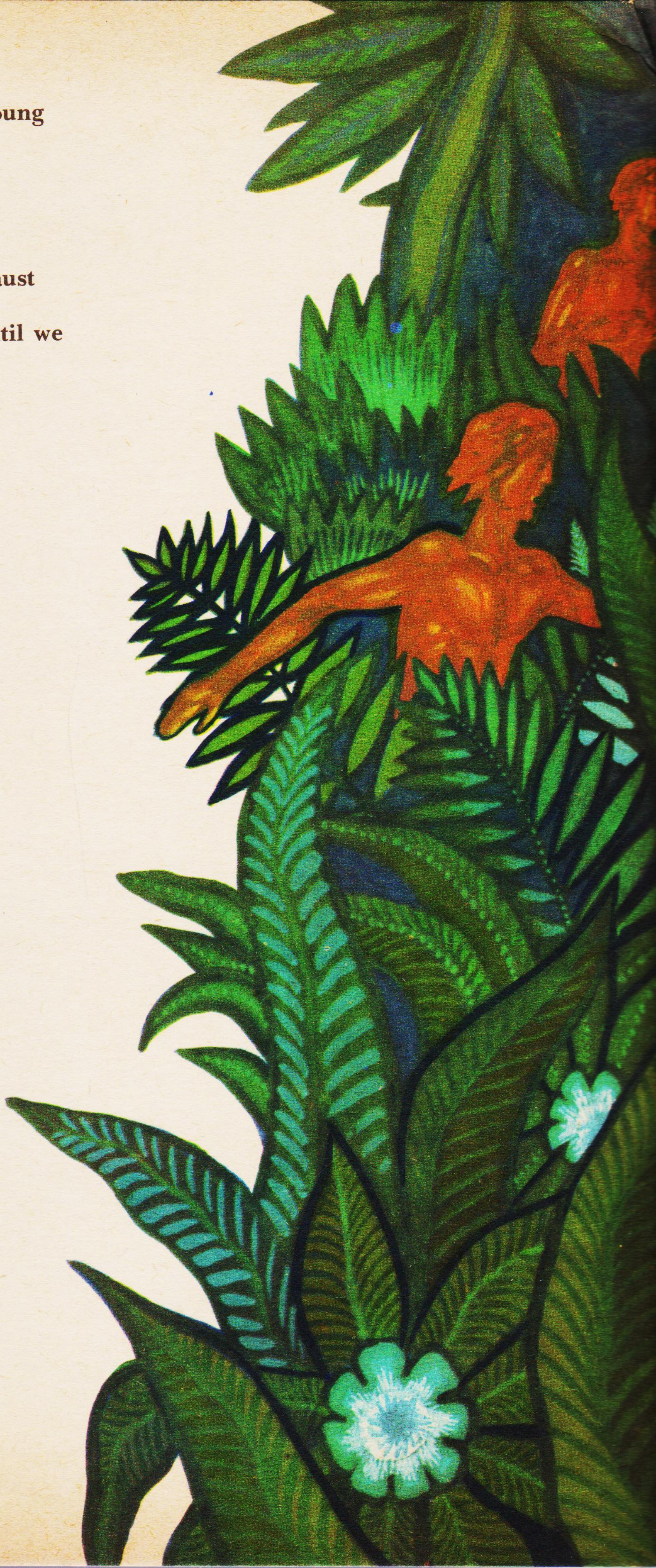
"Stones are not to be removed by thinking. He who does naught will come to naught. Why should we exhaust our energies thinking and brooding? Arise, and let us go through the forest until we come out at the other end; after all, it must have an end—everything has an end. Come, let us set forth!"

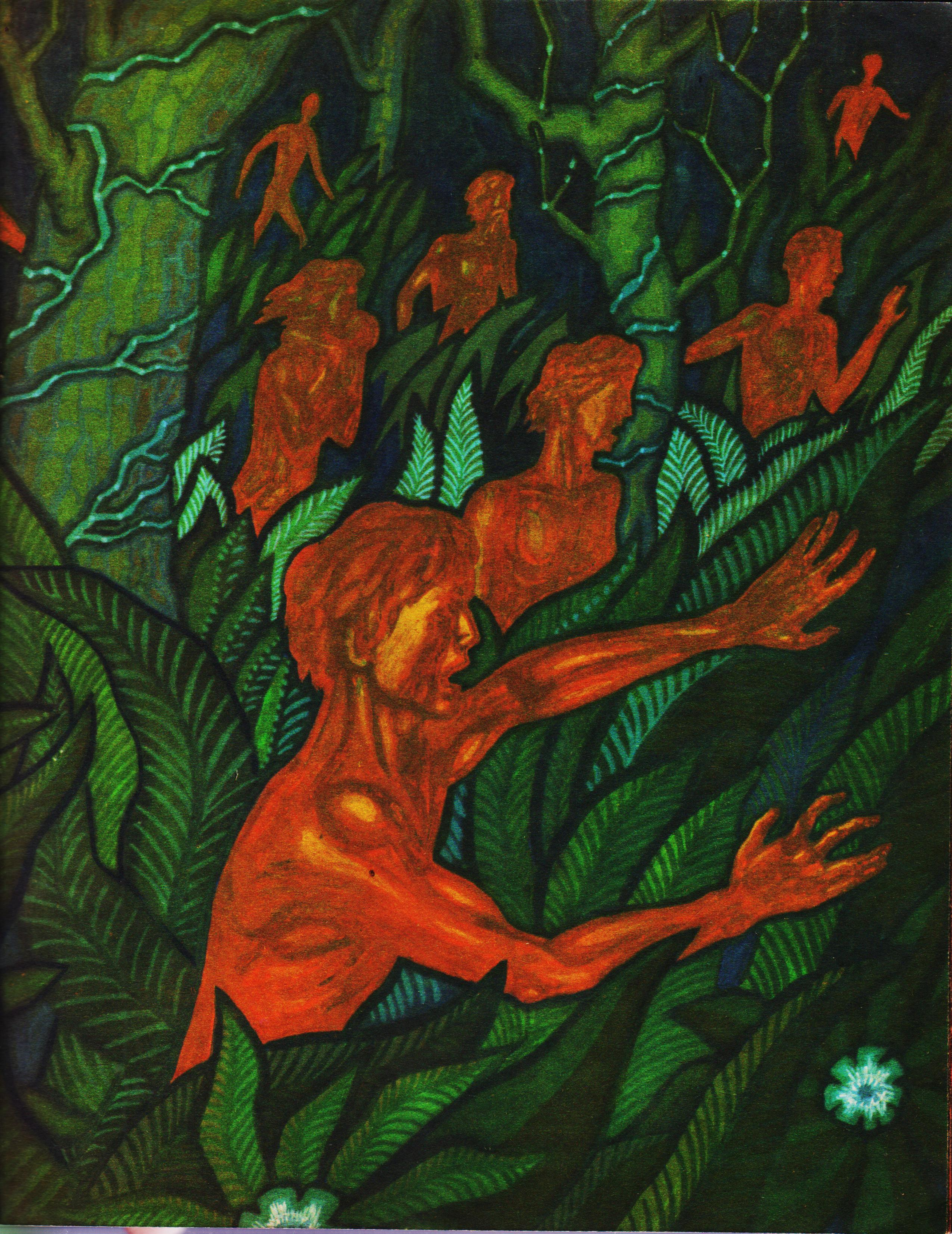
They looked at him and saw that he was the best man among them, for his eyes were aglow with life and strength.

"Lead us," they said.

And he led them!

And so he led them, Danko. And they followed him willingly, for they believed in him. It was a difficult trek. It was dark, and at every step the yawning bogs swallowed people up, and the trees were like a mighty wall barring the way. Their branches were closely interwoven, their roots were like snakes reaching out in every direction, and every step these people took cost them blood and sweat. For a long time they went on... And the further they went, the thicker grew the forest and the weaker grew their limbs. And then they began to murmur against Danko, saying that he was young and inexperienced and had no right to bring them here. But he kept walking at their head, his spirit undaunted, his mind unclouded.





But one day a storm broke over the forest, and the trees whispered together menacingly. And instantly it became as dark as if here were gathered all the nights that had passed since the forest was born. And the little people walked on under the big trees amid the roar of the storm, and as they walked the giant trees creaked and sang a sinister song, and the lightning flashed above the tree-tops, throwing a cold blue light over the forest for a brief instant, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared and striking terror into the hearts of the people. And in the cold flashes of the lightning the trees seemed to be live things that were stretching out long gnarled arms and weaving them into a net to catch these people who were trying to escape from darkness. And something cold and dark and fearsome peered at them through the dark foliage.

It was a difficult trek, and the people who had set out on it grew exhausted and lost heart. But they were ashamed to admit their weakness, and so they poured out their anger and resentment on Danko, who was walking at their head. They began to accuse him of being incapable of leading them.

They came to a halt, and, tired and angry, they began to upbraid him there in the quivering darkness, amid the triumphant roar of the storm.

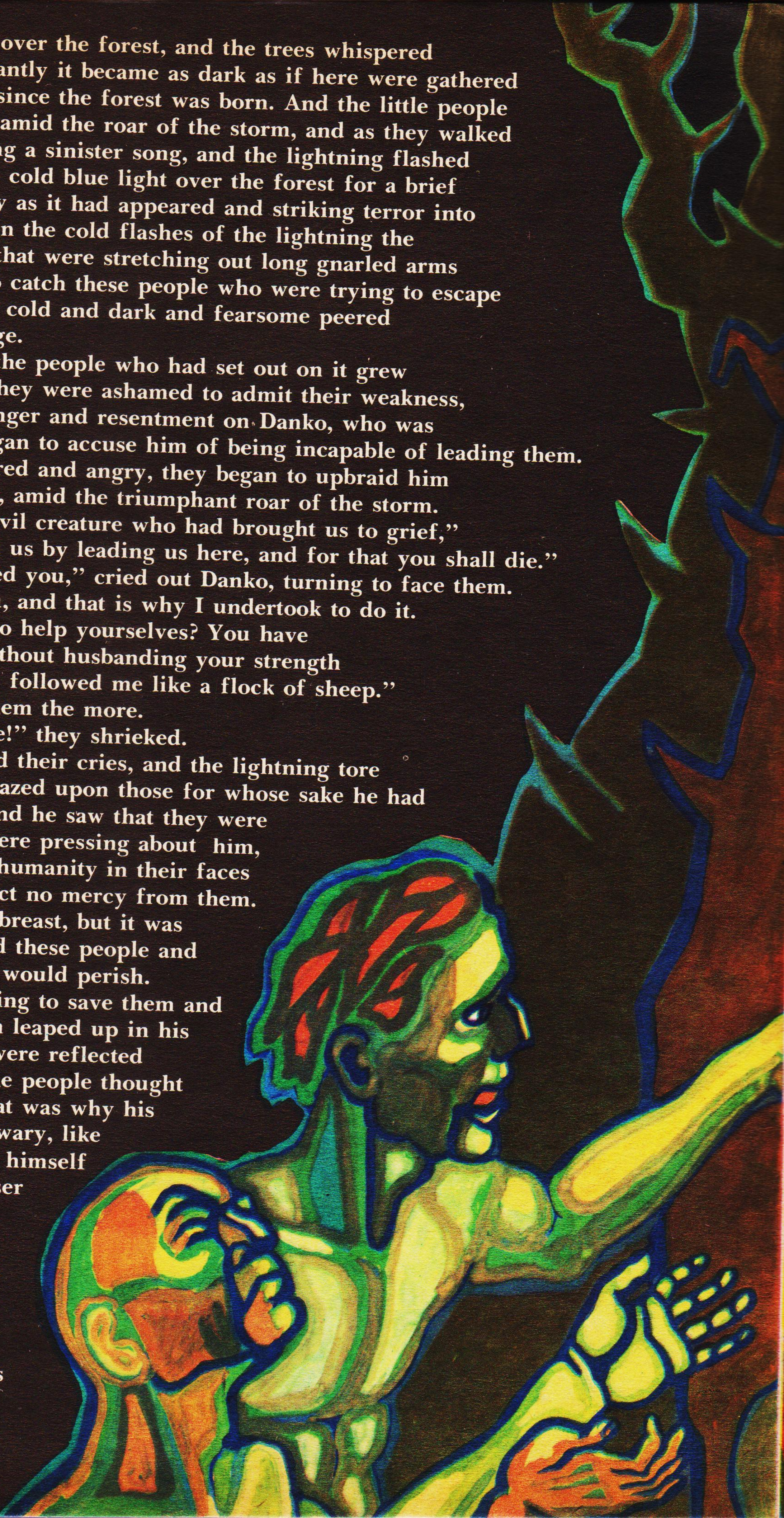
"You are a despicable and evil creature who had brought us to grief," they said. "You have exhausted us by leading us here, and for that you shall die."

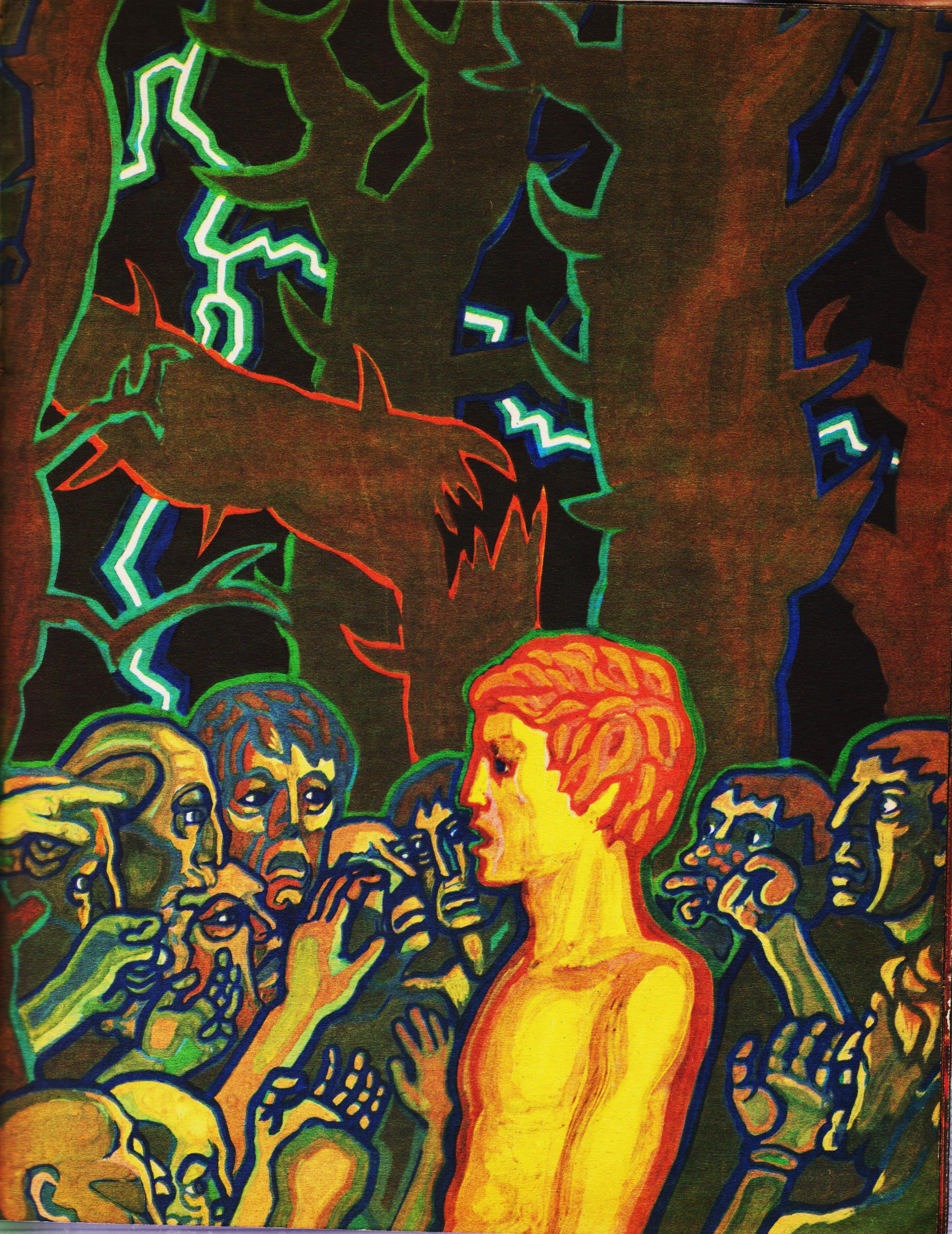
"You said: Lead us! and I led you," cried out Danko, turning to face them. "I have the courage to lead you, and that is why I undertook to do it. But you? What have you done to help yourselves? You have done nothing but follow me, without husbanding your strength for a longer march. You merely followed me like a flock of sheep."

His words only infuriated them the more.

"You shall die! You shall die!" they shrieked.

The forest roared and echoed their cries, and the lightning tore the darkness to shreds. Danko gazed upon those for whose sake he had undertaken such great labour, and he saw that they were like wild beasts. Many people were pressing about him, but he could detect no signs of humanity in their faces and he knew that he could expect no mercy from them. Then resentment seethed in his breast, but it was quelled by compassion. He loved these people and he feared that without him they would perish. And the flames of a great yearning to save them and lead them out on to an easy path leaped up in his heart, and these mighty flames were reflected in his eyes.... And seeing this, the people thought he was enraged; they thought that was why his eyes flashed so. And they grew wary, like wolves, expecting him to throw himself against them, and they drew closer about him that they might seize him and kill him. He saw what they were thinking, but the flames in his heart only flared up the brighter, for their thoughts added the oil of sorrow to the flames of his yearning.





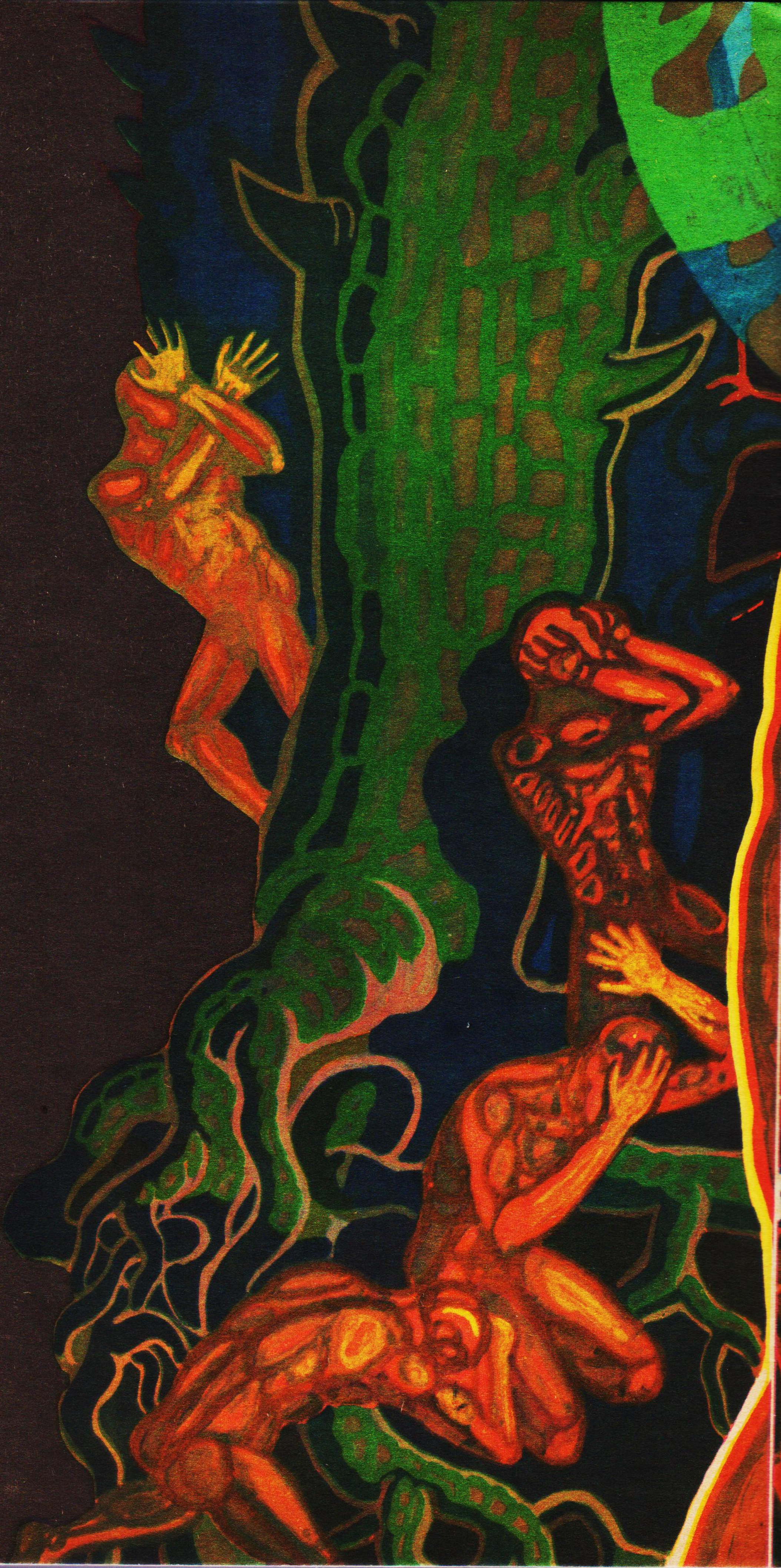
And the forest went on singing its mournful song, and the thunder crashed, and the rain poured down....

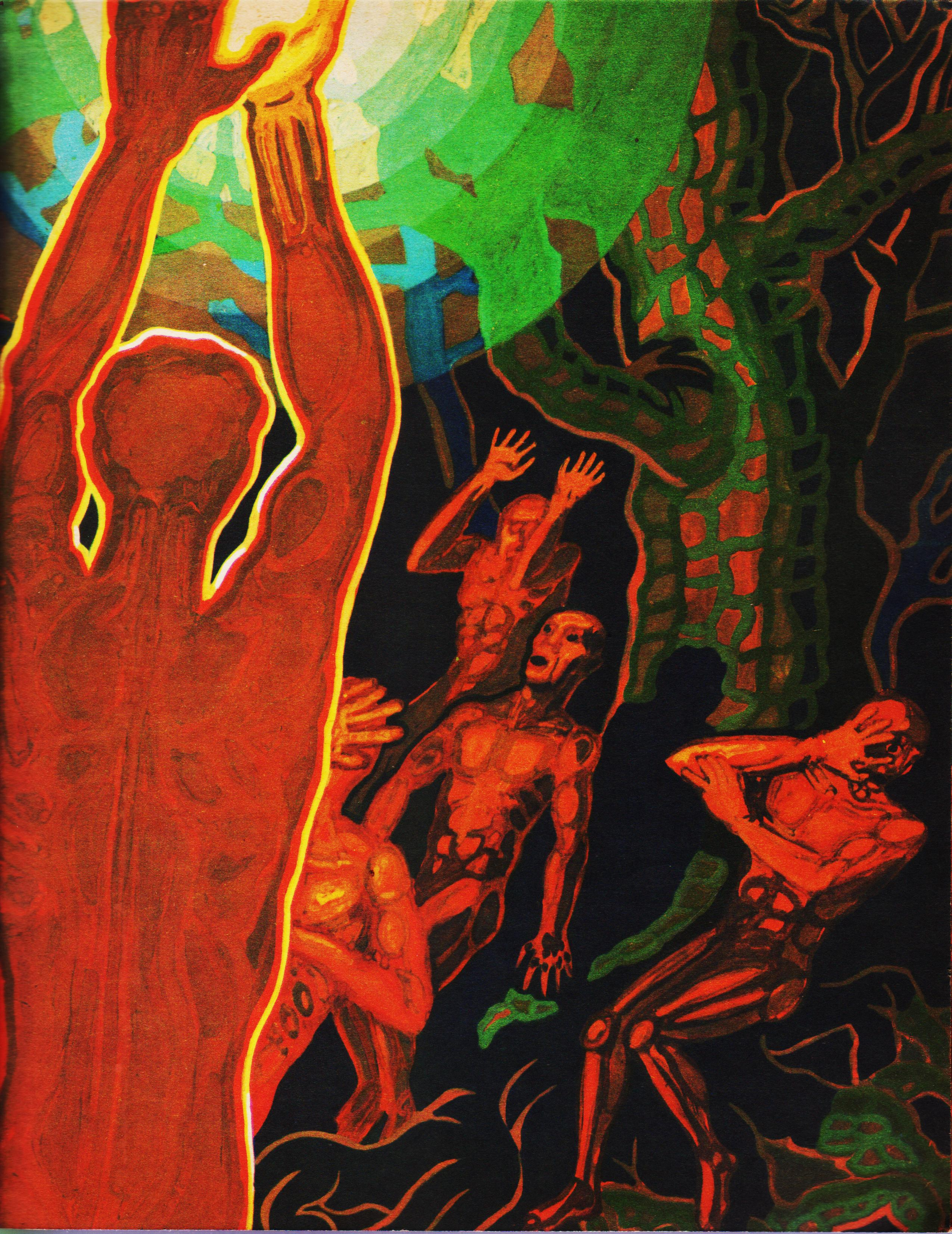
"What else can I do to save these people?" cried out Danko above the thunder.

And suddenly he ripped open his breast and tore out his heart and held it high above his head.

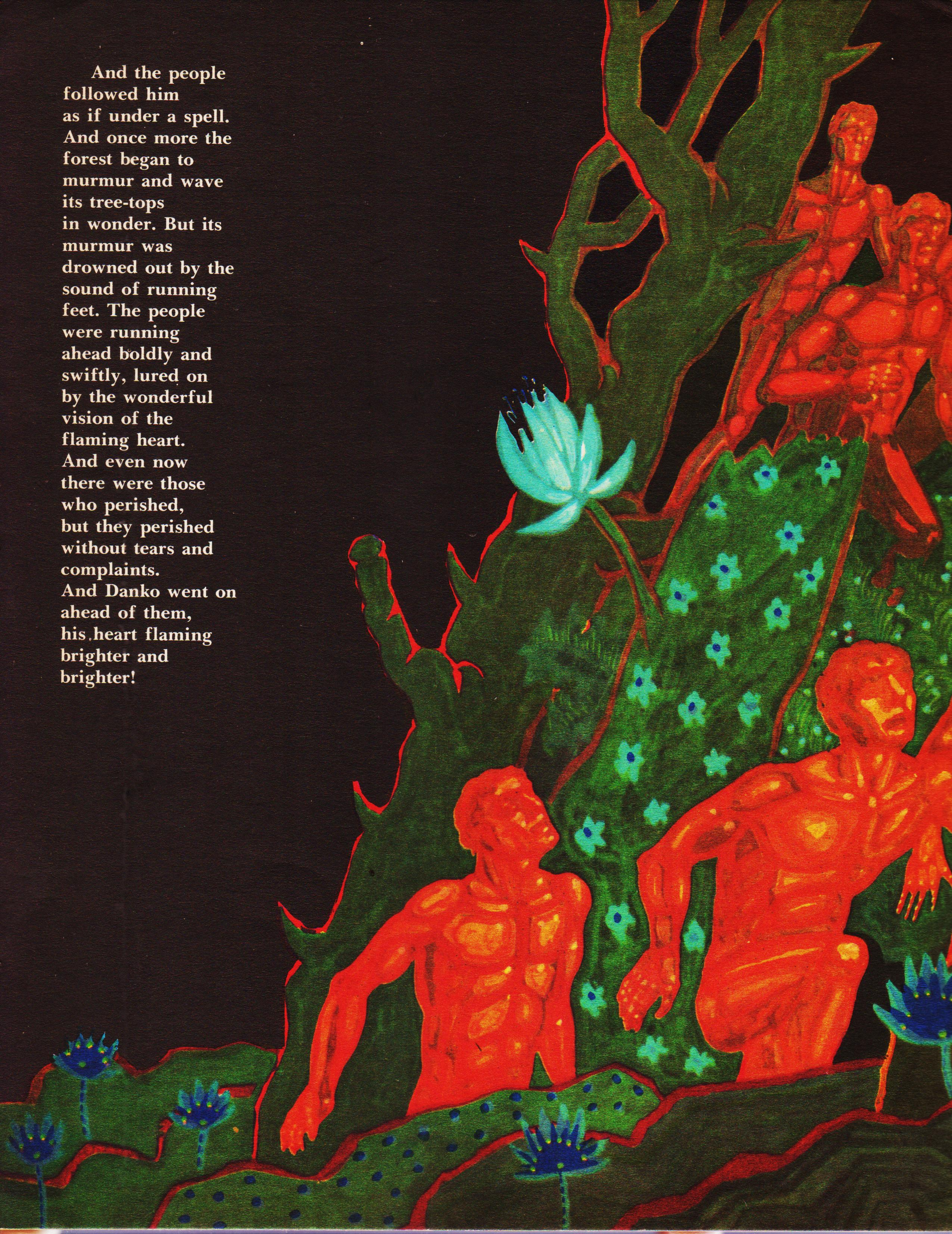
It shone like the sun, even brighter than the sun, and the raging forest was subdued and lighted up by this torch, the torch of a great love for the people, and the darkness retreated before it and plunged, quivering, into a yawning bog in the depths of the forest. And in their astonishment the people were as if turned to stone.

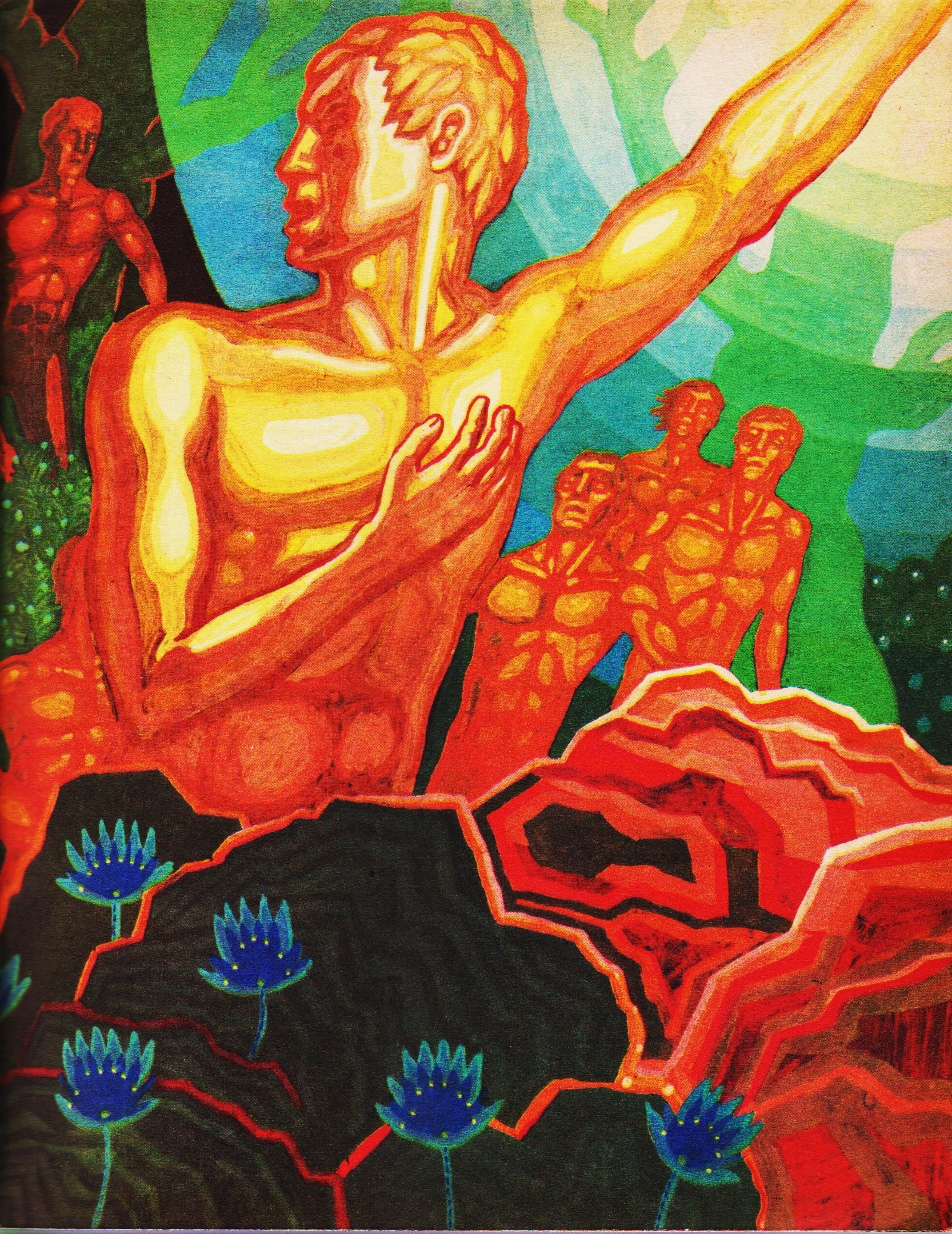
"Follow me!" cried Danko, and he rushed forward, holding his flaming heart high above his head to light the way.





And the people followed him as if under a spell. And once more the forest began to murmur and wave its tree-tops in wonder. But its murmur was drowned out by the sound of running feet. The people were running ahead boldly and swiftly, lured on by the wonderful vision of the flaming heart. And even now there were those who perished, but they perished without tears and complaints. And Danko went on ahead of them, his heart flaming brighter and brighter!

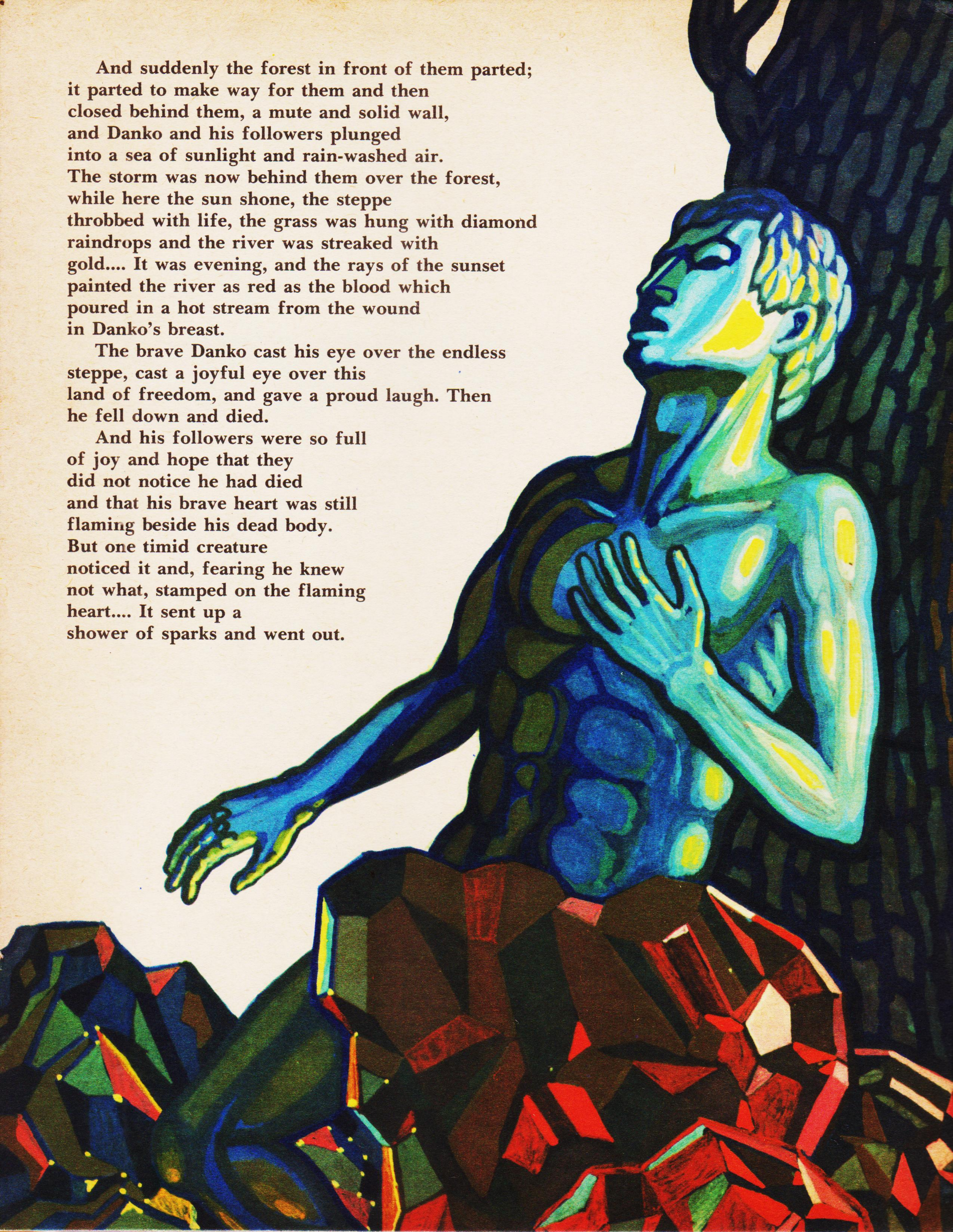




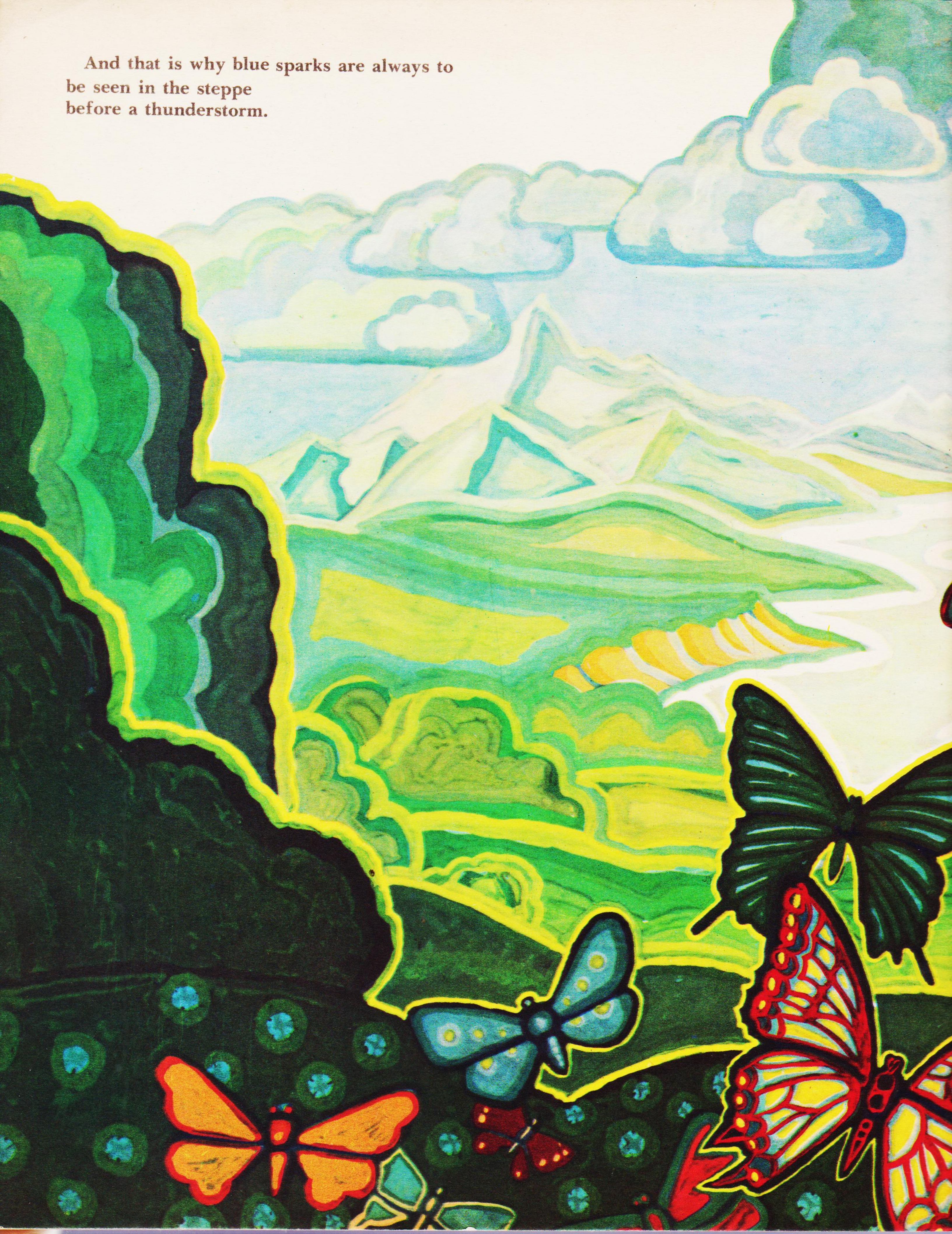
And suddenly the forest in front of them parted; it parted to make way for them and then closed behind them, a mute and solid wall, and Danko and his followers plunged into a sea of sunlight and rain-washed air. The storm was now behind them over the forest, while here the sun shone, the steppe throbbed with life, the grass was hung with diamond raindrops and the river was streaked with gold.... It was evening, and the rays of the sunset painted the river as red as the blood which poured in a hot stream from the wound in Danko's breast.

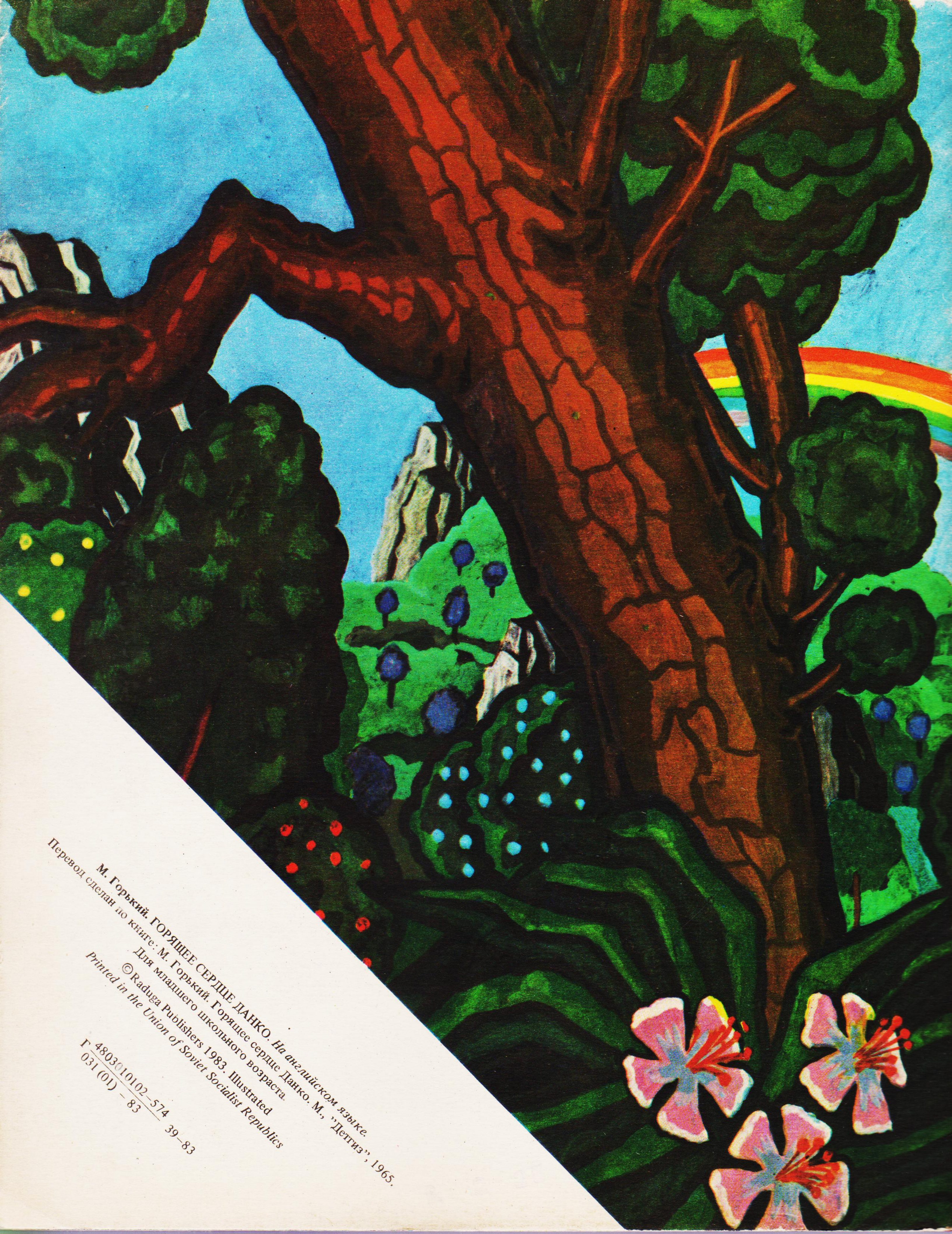
The brave Danko cast his eye over the endless steppe, cast a joyful eye over this land of freedom, and gave a proud laugh. Then he fell down and died.

And his followers were so full of joy and hope that they did not notice he had died and that his brave heart was still flaming beside his dead body. But one timid creature noticed it and, fearing he knew not what, stamped on the flaming heart.... It sent up a shower of sparks and went out.



And that is why blue sparks are always to
be seen in the steppe
before a thunderstorm.





М. Горький. ГОРЯЩЕЕ СЕРДЦЕ ДАНКО. *На английском языке.*
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